

Fossil Creek Wild and Scenic River Comprehensive River Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement Coconino and Tonto National Forests

Frequently Asked Questions

11/29/2016

Due to the complexity of the Fossil Creek Wild and Scenic River planning effort, it is natural that public participants will have questions. The below text is meant to address aspects of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (WSRA), requiring a Comprehensive River Management Plan (CRMP), and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process.

1. **Question:** How long does a Comprehensive River Management Plan (CRMP) typically take to complete?

Answer: The length of time required to complete a CRMP depends on many factors ranging from the resources present in the river corridor to recreational use to the location of the river itself. Work on the Fossil Creek CRMP itself has been ongoing since 2010, gathering baseline data to be analyzed to ensure a plan adequately addresses the complexity of the natural and cultural resources and recreational use in the river corridor, while meeting legal requirements. Some CRMPs could potentially be completed in a year while others have taken over a decade. The CRMP is only one aspect of the Forest Service's effort to manage Fossil Creek. Recently, the Forest Service has placed a substantial amount of work into managing the large increase in recreational use the area has experienced, including developing a 2016 interim management reservation system.

2. **Question:** Will previous public comments collected since 2010 be considered now?

Answer: Yes. Public comments the Forest Service has collected since the planning effort began serve as the basis for the range of preliminary alternative concepts presented now in 2016. All previous comments have helped the Forest Service understand the issues important to people who visit or are interested in Fossil Creek, namely how people are able to recreate in Fossil Creek, the impacts that use has on natural and cultural resources, the amount and type of recreational development in the Fossil Creek corridor, and public health and safety. The current set of alternatives is based directly on these issues. Comments submitted in earlier phases of planning for the Fossil Creek CRMP need not be resubmitted in response to the Nov. 29, 2016, Notice of Intent in the *Federal Register*.

3. **Question:** Can the successful 2016 reservation system be Fossil Creek's management plan?

Answer: The Forest Service and other agencies are required by the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (WSRA) to develop a CRMP for the long-term management of a Wild and Scenic River. The current reservation system is an "interim measure" to help manage the recreational use that is occurring in Fossil Creek but in and of itself does not meet the legal requirements of a CRMP. The CRMP will likely formalize a system similar to the reservation system but will

also provide guidance for management of all aspects of the river corridor, including natural and cultural resources, recreation sites, roads, trails, and visitor capacities. The current management alternatives present a range of options, from managing Fossil Creek much as it is today to increasing visitor capacity numbers and recreation site developments in the long run, if appropriate through adaptive management. Guidance, documented in July 2016, from the Interagency Visitor Use Management Council supports a hard look at visitor capacity and its impacts.

4. **Question:** Will it be necessary to close areas within Fossil Creek to recreational use?

Answer: Certain areas of the Fossil Creek corridor, including the Waterfall Trail and Fossil Springs, are especially sensitive to the impacts of human use due to local natural and cultural resource concerns. The Forest Service is required by the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (WSRA) to identify and protect or enhance the “outstandingly remarkable values” of Fossil Creek through the CRMP; in some cases, doing so may require closing certain areas. When reviewing the five alternatives, notice that some propose closing sensitive water areas while others do not. The analysis in the EIS will help determine what closures may be necessary. Where any closures are proposed in the management alternatives, it is recognized that the closures will take time to implement. Education will be critical, as will ensuring visitors to Fossil Creek have other opportunities to recreate within the river corridor away from the especially sensitive areas.

5. **Question:** As some visitors had difficulty driving the gravel roads to access Fossil Creek, will the CRMP analysis address roads, including maintenance?

Answer: Each of the preliminary alternative concepts presents road use details, in particular regarding a section of Forest Road 708 from Fossil Creek Bridge east toward Strawberry. A study completed in 2014 assessed the work that would be required to stabilize and maintain this approximately 4.1-mile section of Forest Road 708. The study found that a substantial amount of work may be required to complete initial stabilization and safety improvement activities, after which annual maintenance would be required. The geotechnical study estimated initial stabilization could cost several million dollars, with substantial annual maintenance required thereafter. (Note: Utility company APS, which was responsible for maintenance on the road up to 2007, reported its average maintenance budget for this section of road was approximately \$180,000 per year.) Costs will be taken into consideration in the analysis of the alternatives and will inform the decision on how roads and motorized trails will be managed in the CRMP. Congress allocates a limited budget to the Forest Service for road maintenance across all National Forest System lands.

6. **Question:** What coordination has already happened between the Forest Service and the public, as well as Native American Tribes, concerning the CRMP?

Answer: Since 2010, the Forest Service has engaged with the public about development of the CRMP on several occasions. Public comments the Forest Service has collected since the planning effort began serve as the basis for the range of management alternatives presented now. Additionally, the Forest Service has dialogued with groups, such as the Verde Front and Fossil Creek Working Group, and has worked closely with area Tribes to develop the current management alternatives. Please know that the Forest Service welcomes the public's input and will consider it if submitted at any time throughout the planning process. Moving forward after the current 45-day comment period in early 2017, there will be at least one more formal opportunity to provide comments on the CRMP when a draft EIS is available, anticipated in mid-2017. After that, the project will be subject to the objection process, pursuant to 36 CFR 218. Issues raised in objections must be based on previously submitted timely, specific written comments regarding the proposed project unless new information arises after designated opportunities (36 CFR 218.7).

7. **Question:** Why does Fossil Creek CRMP's proposed action consider an increase in visitation, even though the area has been overcrowded in the past?

Answer: The proposed action, called Long-term Adaptive Management (Alternative E), would allow more visitors than the current 2016 reservation management level. The initial people at one time (PAOT) in the river corridor would be set at the current management level—approximately 154 vehicles and 780 PAOT, including administrative use. Over time, if appropriate, adaptive management would increase capacity to a permitted maximum of approximately 338 vehicles and 1,705 PAOT as infrastructure is built, management capacity allows, and visitor behavior promotes sustainable river value protection. Capacity numbers and recreational facility developments depicted in Alternative E represent a “full build out” scenario and would not be implemented immediately. In fact, increases in capacity or additional facility development should be viewed as adaptive management actions that would be contingent on not degrading Fossil Creek's outstandingly remarkable values (ORVs) and not exceeding management's capacity to implement, fund and support management of Fossil Creek.

8. **Question:** What is propelling the CRMP's renewed effort by the Forest Service at this time?

Answer: The Forest Service has researched the intricacies of managing a Wild and Scenic River since Fossil Creek was designated in 2009, and the management alternatives being presented now reflect lessons learned. This, combined with the success of the new reservation system at resolving some of the on-the-ground recreation issues, puts the Forest Service in a place where it can devote renewed effort to developing the CRMP. The release of the NOI, in November 2016, officially kicks off this renewed effort, and the Forest Service will work diligently to complete the EIS efficiently. It is important to note, however, that some timeframes are set by the NEPA process and that most EIS-level planning efforts take a couple of years or more.